United Nations E/CN.6/2011/NGO/43

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
6 December 2010
English
Original: French

Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fifth session
22 February-4 March 2011
Item 3 (a) of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by the Coordination française du lobby européen des femmes, Femmes solidaires and Regards de femmes, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2011/1.

10-67407 (E) 211210 301210

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Statement

Coordination française du lobby européen des femmes (CLEF), Femmes solidaires and Regards de femmes reaffirm that gender equality is a principle recognized as a fundamental right and one that concerns all women worldwide. It is in the field of women's rights, however, that the widest gap exists between promises and reality. It is time for Governments to implement the international recommendations developed by their States.

Respect for differences can in no way result in violation of women's human rights. Practices, models and traditional or religious constraints that limit recognition of women's full capacity, their rights and the effective achievement of gender equality in terms of rights, duties and dignity must be eradicated.

The above-mentioned organizations call on all States parties to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol) and the Beijing Platform for Action to prohibit all forms of humiliation, discrimination or violence against women suffered or "chosen" by women, including in the name of religion or customs. The Millennium Development Goals recall that the problems faced by women are passed on to succeeding generations and must be eradicated.

1. Guaranteeing education, including scientific and technological education, for all girls

CLEF, Femmes solidaires and Regards de femmes recall that in the French Republic, compulsory, secular and free public education for girls and boys alike has been in place since the secular laws of 1882 took effect. Insofar as secularism is a formidable tool for empowerment, all girls living in France, including those from migrant or undocumented families, have access to compulsory primary and secondary schooling up to the age of 16.

In all countries, Governments must ensure that compulsory schooling is respected and take measures to address low levels of school enrolment.

In today's world, two thirds of illiterate adults are women and at least 72 million children, some 60 per cent of them girls, are not in school.

Not to allow girls to attend school is to deny them the opportunity to develop their capacities and talents. It also denies such opportunities to their children and perpetuates poverty.

The highest numbers of boys and girls not enrolled in school are among children of non-literate mothers. In order to escape this downward spiral of poverty, it is essential to tackle inequalities at their root and promote education for the girl child. Women who have had formal schooling are more likely to avoid early marriage and pregnancy and to enable their own children to attend school and be better cared for. In developing countries, the disparity in the number of children per household varies according to level of education.

The reasons preventing girls from attending school are well known:

- Traditions and customs: from forced and early marriage to the unequal distribution of tasks within families, which is compounded on the death of parents from HIV/AIDS;
- Distance of schools and safety issues in the school environment and on the journey to and from school (violence among pupils and between teachers and pupils, lack of toilet facilities, etc.);
- School fees and other expenses incurred: school supplies, uniforms, meals;
- Legal frameworks unfavourable to girls in cases where young women are prohibited by law from pursuing their education during pregnancy and even from returning to school after giving birth.

Governments must wait no longer to make primary education accessible to all girls, including in rural areas, irrespective of family income or ethnic origin. Measures must be taken to facilitate the transition from primary to secondary education, to vocational training, to non-formal education and to entry into working life.

Girls' education is all-important for them, for their families and for society. A whole host of action programmes are targeted at the various obstacles, whether traditional, patriarchal, financial, geographical or security-related.

Many girls, however, are ineligible for these programmes because they were unregistered at birth. Lack of birth registration is a mechanism for social exclusion; a declaration of birth is a prerequisite to existing.

CLEF, Femmes solidaires and Regards de femmes are organizing a workshop during the fifty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women. It will focus on the exclusion of girls from the right to education owing to lack of birth registration.

2. Deconstructing patriarchal traditions

In order for girls to attain their independence and be empowered, non-patriarchal education for girls and boys is essential. This will ensure that girls have access to all vocational areas and will strengthen the fight against gender-based violence.

Children's education must therefore not only include the transmission of human, cultural and scientific knowledge but also teach boys and girls how to reflect, imagine, create and interact with others who are different from them.

School is the place where children become part of humanity, both through learning and by meeting other people. That is why school must not be beholden to any political or religious ideology. Girls and boys must be taught to live together with mutual respect.

This was the reason for the 2004 French law against religious symbols in school, which protects the girl child and young girls.

If the girl child and young girls are seen as a source of disruption and must cover their hair in public places to protect boys, who are deemed incapable of

controlling their impulses, this sends a message that is completely at odds with the principle of gender equality.

What view are girls and boys supposed to form of the world if their mothers and sisters must hide themselves behind a veil when they go outside? What image do they have of women?

Governments should provide programmes to promote equality between girls and boys throughout the school year at all levels of the educational system. All relevant stakeholders (parents, teachers, careers advisers) should be involved in changing stereotypical images of men and women's social roles, which still influence career choices and boy-girl relationships. To avoid early and unwanted pregnancies, and the transmission of HIV/AIDS, education for equality must include sex education, as well as education on respect and gender equality in terms of rights, duties and dignity. Teachers of both sexes must be trained in a way that enables them to deconstruct the messages whereby girls and boys are pigeonholed into stereotypical roles. The teaching of the history of women (in the fields of politics, economics, literature, science and art) and sensitization campaigns against stereotypes in school textbooks are essential.

3. Professional equality

Governments should introduce and support policies for professional equality training and equal access to continuing education, and should take measures to promote the equal sharing of unpaid work between women and men. Child and dependant care by high-quality professional social services help to create jobs and reduce unemployment.

Governments should establish economic and social policies that promote gender equality, including equal pay and equal pensions. These policies should also combat poverty among women, in particular older women, and single-parent families.

Governments should adopt compulsory measures for parity in decision-making bodies in the economic and financial sectors, on the executive boards of companies and in elected assemblies.

The context of the economic and financial crisis should not threaten to set back women's rights; on the contrary, it should provide a window of opportunity. Recovery from the crisis requires the empowerment of women in all areas, including in economic fields, and consequently access to financial independence for every woman.

To combat poverty among women, all States should adopt and enforce laws on equality in inheritance between women and men.

Governments should make equal pay for men and women a reality through incentives or disciplinary measures. The difference in salaries between men and women is a sign that employers are driven by mistrust not to give women the same responsibilities as men. Such economic violence towards women entrenches the idea that they are not as valuable or as capable as men. By thus promoting a conventional attitude towards employment, the situation is reproduced in a small number of families of jobs that are less valued and less well paid.

Only parity between men and women in all decision-making bodies will succeed in demolishing what is neither a sticky floor nor a glass ceiling, but a stronghold of the politico-financial system.

The member associations of CLEF, Femmes solidaires and Regards de femmes are tirelessly pursuing their efforts in all areas of women's rights to ensure that empowerment, independence and gender equality in rights, duties and dignity are not only an ideal but are effectively achieved.